

# METRO

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## Cyclists, drivers struggle to chart road rules

### Bike to Work Week highlights challenges in sharing streets

BY ASHLEY HALSEY III

As the steady cadence of turning pedals carried Michelle Harburg through the spitting morning rain, cars quickly stacked up behind her in the right lane of Constitution Avenue near the shadow of the Capitol.

Caught in the first surge of the day's rush hour, the driver of a white Acura tried to inch past her, only to fall back as a Metrobus loomed just to the left. A second try at a lane change ran afoul, with a black Cadillac SUV bearing down. A horn sounded, brake lights flashed and then the Acura slipped by.

"About 60 percent of the drivers are positive," Harburg said as she locked her bike a few minutes later. "And 40 percent are negative, and when I say negative, mostly I mean just not aware. About 10 percent of them just don't like bikers. They shout at you, 'Get off the Road!' or beep just to try to scare you to death."

### Cycling fatalities

In 2008, 714 cyclists were killed in the United States in crashes with motor vehicles, down 75 percent since 1975 but up 14 percent since 2003. Many more bicyclists were killed in urban areas (68 percent) rather than rural areas (31 percent). In 1975, cycling deaths occurred equally in urban and rural areas.

Between 1975 and 2008, about **eight of every 10** cycling fatalities were male.



In 2008, **nine of every 10** cyclists killed weren't wearing helmets.

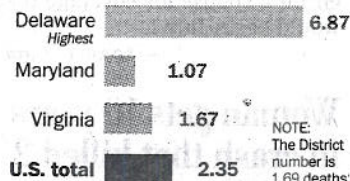


SOURCES: NHTSA National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2008; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety

This week is Bike to Work Week, an annual event devoted to the notion that commuters ought to switch from four wheels to two. This year, it comes as miles of bike lanes are being added in the Dis-

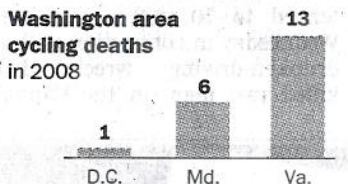
### Cycling traffic deaths

Per million of population in 2008



NOTE: The District number is 1.69 deaths.

### Washington area cycling deaths in 2008



BILL WEBSTER AND TOBEY/THE WASHINGTON POST

trict and throughout the region and the nation. Thousands of Washington residents are expected to make the switch Friday for Bike to Work Day.

The challenge of merging bikes

washingtonpost.com/local

Review the latest data on bicycle fatalities.

and cars on highways has had consequences: The overall number of traffic fatalities in the United States has dropped to its lowest point since 1961, but deaths of bike riders are up.

Sometimes, there are consequences for drivers and cyclists alike. Royal Kessick of Richmond was indicted on manslaughter charges three weeks ago by a St. Mary's County grand jury that looked into his fatal collision with cyclist Hugo Gonzalez last summer. Baltimore County authorities are investigating Faith Frenzel's crash last month that killed Larry Bensky and badly injured his cycling buddy, Joel Wyman.

Bensky and Gonzalez, athletes struck down while training, were unusual victims, a review of the region's cycling fatalities suggests.

"The people who do it for sport generally handle their bikes pretty well," said Detective Scott Neville, who investigates fatal accidents in Fairfax County. "It's the

BICYCLING CONTINUED ON B5





GERALD MARTINEAU FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

During the morning rush, bicyclists compete with cars for a share of the road at Constitution and New Jersey avenues NW in the District.

# For cyclists, drivers, etiquette runs two ways

## BICYCLING FROM B1

people who are biking to and from work, without so much awareness or understanding of the law, who get into trouble."

### A new role for bikes

America's much-chronicled love affair with the automobile and the beckoning freedom of the open road are experiencing something of a midlife crisis. Bicyclists just add one more variable to the equation.

Frustrated by congested traffic, busy with cellphones and often in a rush, drivers are displaying less patience than ever with cyclists who block traffic and sometimes ride erratically, flying through stop signs and traffic lights.

For bike riders, the dangers of sharing roads range from honks, shouts and thrown objects to distracted or drunk drivers and those who try to crowd bicyclists from the road.

"I realize that we can be our own worst enemies when we blow through stop signs," said Andy Clarke, president of the League of American Bicyclists. "Clearly, people are irritated by our presence, but to the point of wishing to hit us or brush up against us? It blows my mind."

Americans drive more than 3 trillion miles a year, an increase of nearly 100 percent in the past quarter-century, a period when the miles of roadway to accommodate them grew by just 5 percent.

Throw onto those busy roads the estimated 38 million cyclists who make more than 2.5 billion trips during the warmer months alone, and some friction is inevitable.

With the sketchy outline of a Washington area biking network beginning to emerge — the District wants to almost double the distance of bike lanes to 80 miles — the bicycle clearly has emerged in the past few decades as a more common roadway fixture.

No less than U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced a "sea change" last month in federal policy: "This is the end of favoring motorized transportation at the expense of nonmotorized."

But also prevalent is the frustration felt by many drivers, as evidenced when LaHood — who holds a job that has traditionally

been to oversee trains, planes and highways — said government policy would treat "walking and bicycling as equals with other transportation modes."

That policy was quickly denounced by the National Association of Manufacturers, which said it could undermine the effort to put Americans back to work, and Transportation Undersecretary Roy W. Kienitz was quizzed about it a few days later at a House appropriations committee hearing.

"If we're going to spend \$1 million on a road, we're not going to have half of it go to a bike lane and half of it go to cars?" asked Rep. Steven C. LaTourette (R-Ohio), adding later, "I don't even understand how you get a bang for the buck out of a bicycle project. I mean, what job is going to be created by having a bike lane?"

### Clash of cultures

The most powerful place on Earth for most Americans is 22 feet wide and rolls like a smooth ribbon to the horizon and beyond. Thousands of pounds of machinery respond to a tap on an accelerator, and, on a good day, a lane of unimpeded highway awaits.



Until now, the bicycle never figured much in the mix.

Forty years ago, bicycles were ridden by children and people who could not afford cars. Adults rode them at the beach. In 1975, almost 70 percent of fatal bike accidents involved people younger than 16. By 2008, the number had dropped to 13 percent. Children's bikes accounted for 21 percent of new sales last year.

In China, Italy, England or any other country where adults long have used bikes to get about, drivers expect and more readily accommodate them on the road. Although the upsurge in adult cyclists in the United States began in the 1980s, neither the road designs nor the culture has fully adjusted.

"A small percentage of drivers are apparently enraged either by the sight of a cyclist or by being held up for 10 seconds," said Alexander Meller, an Annapolis bike rider. "It's a huge contrast to Europe, where drivers most frequently wave, and where I've never seen the behavior I see here."

Not enough of America's bicyclists — drivers and many cyclists say — have developed responsible

riding habits.

"I've seen cyclists on the sidewalk or skipping through traffic lights," said Jody Carlson of Fair Lakes, who gave up bicycling 20 years ago. "I don't know if they don't care or what."

Janet King, who lives in the District, said, "Stop signs and red lights do not have signs that say 'Except for bikes.'"

"No one is addressing the issue of rude behavior by bikers," she said. "If they want respect, they must give respect."

### A way to coexist

Laws that require cars to keep a safe distance from cyclists — 18 states have a three-foot mandate, and one such rule will take effect in Maryland in October — are seen as part of the solution, as are dedicated bike lanes and paths. And cyclists tend to agree on the need to clean up their act.

"For every accident, there are thousands of close calls or road rage," said Loren Mooney, editor of *Bicycling* magazine. "People on both sides of the equation need to be more aware of the situation. Most drivers have no concept of how vulnerable a cyclist is."

She said a bike rider can be sucked into a vehicle's slipstream and crash into one that passes too closely.

"The most common excuse from a driver is 'I didn't see' him," Mooney said. "You have to pay more attention to see a cyclist or a pedestrian. Too many people are what I call cell[phone] drunk."

In addition to riding responsibly, she said, cyclists need to learn to "keep your middle finger on the handle bars."

Harburg cycles from just north of Columbia Heights through the heart of the District on her way to the Eastern Market pool on North Carolina Avenue a few times a week.

"When I'm moving from the side toward the middle of a lane, I think drivers realize it's because there's a parked car or a pothole," she said. "I'm doing it for my own safety, not to annoy them, and they yell, 'Stay to the right.'"

If cyclists become as common in the United States as they are on many of the rest of the world's roads, Randy Karn predicts motorists will simply have to learn to get along.

"When cyclists are few and far between, drivers are uncomfort-

able," said Karn, chairman of the Reston Bike Club. "When there are cyclists everywhere, you'll figure out how to deal with it."

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